

Hidden Assumptions, Attitudes, and Procedures in Failing Schools

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More important than the curriculum is the question of methods of teaching and the spirit in which the teaching is given.

—Bertrand Russell

Sometimes the attitudes, beliefs, and procedures that have become ingrained in the schools just do not “fit,” explain, or help every child. Many hidden assumptions, attitudes, and procedures are practiced routinely in schools without much thought or analysis. One possible explanation for their occurrence is that we become comfortable with familiar routines and believe we must be doing OK because that’s the way schools have always operated. Another likely possibility involves a combination of factors including a lack of time, expertise, energy, or money to look thoughtfully into these issues. Whatever the case, there definitely is a need to do so.

Let’s begin by looking at issues within our society. No doubt we live in a wonderful country. However, possessing freedom and a right to a free public education can have its shadow side. Possibly we’ve grown to regard education as something given to our students: a passive process in which many expect spoon-fed learning. But a true education cannot be obtained in that manner. Education is a process that develops over time through hard work, dedication, and perseverance. Undeniably a right in our country, it is a true gift, but one that must be earned.

All too often we witness students doing only the minimum work to get by in their classes. Our natural response to this is to blame them, to say they are lazy, unmotivated, or even ungrateful. But they have learned such behaviors from their parents, from their teachers, and from society. We cannot change the norm overnight, but we can make small changes within our schools to triumph over self-defeating learned behavior. At many schools, significant resistance makes change difficult and often slow.

Resistance can be overcome, however, if we acknowledge the problem, stop the blame, and change what we can. Yes, there are many problems in our society over which we have little control: poverty, violence, and family issues, to name a few, but there are also hidden resistances in our schools that, if identified, we can do something about.

Resistance to change is natural; it is a part of our human nature. It is difficult to acknowledge that the beliefs, policies, and approaches we've been educated and trained to use might not always be best. However, I believe that most of us in the fields of education and psychology want to help the children with whom we work. We must therefore remain open-minded to the possibility of questioning our policies and practices. We need to keep abreast of the current research in our fields, consult with outside professionals, and acknowledge our limitations. We need to look at all possible factors contributing to the problems we see in schoolchildren.

Blaming the Student

One hidden resistance is the assumption that there must be something wrong with a child who is not learning. Why are we reluctant to consider the possibility that the child is not to blame? I suspect it is human nature to become a bit defensive when we believe our work or our personhood is being attacked. However, that is a huge misunderstanding of the issues at hand. We need not feel defensive when most children are doing reasonably well in our classes. We should instead ask, "What can we do differently so that both struggling children and all children can do better?"



Ideally, it is best to address any child's issues holistically, including a complete analysis of the school climate. Keep in mind that positive changes in school climate will benefit all students, making school a safer and more-productive place for all. However, holistic analysis is rare in education. More often than not a struggling child is seen to have a "problem" that must be addressed, rather than the environment containing a hidden problem that could be interfering with learning.

Mark's Case. The case of Mark illustrates how the tendency to blame children can develop. Mark is a ten-year-old from a typical household. His parents both work outside the home, but his mother returns home at three o'clock in the afternoon to care for Mark, his older sister, and one younger brother. He is active and engaged with learning in the classroom and gets along well with his classmates. After school Mark likes to play basketball in the driveway or ride his bike around the neighborhood. Like most boys his age he enjoys computer games, sports, and watching television, although his parents monitor the amount of time and the programs he is allowed to watch.

This case study seems to portray an ideal supportive family and a typical boy with strengths and talents in many areas. Mark's mother and father are caring, involved parents who place a clear value on education. However, in school Mark developed a reputation for hyperactivity and attention problems. His teacher, despite lacking credentials to diagnose ADHD or suggest the use of medication, strongly suggested that he should be placed on Ritalin. This teacher was clearly overstepping her bounds. Although her diagnosis was ruled out by Mark's pediatrician and a psychologist, the hyperactive label "stuck" to him.

In some schools there seems to be an overabundance of children with a particular diagnosis: if not this diagnosis, then another, and children often become what they are labeled. Many children are viewed as deficient or different because they learn differently, do not learn up to expectations, or do not behave like most other children. An accurate diagnosis is often helpful, but a misdiagnosis is likely to be harmful. Such mislabeling or misperception of the child is rarely intentional, but it can happen routinely without examining other possible causes if the child exhibits a few characteristic "symptoms" of a disorder. Nevertheless, the *misunderstanding* and *overuse* of diagnosis can prove costly to the child.

The school's motives are almost always well-intentioned: school personnel do not want to overlook a treatable problem. However, are we in turn overlooking other possible causes of school difficulties by simply labeling—putting the blame on—the child and undermining the child's security and sense of self, when changes within the school may be all that are necessary?

Disincentives

Another common but very different hidden problem, which involves a faulty assumption based upon misinterpreted research, has led to decades of misguided efforts to help children develop more positive self-esteem. The self-esteem movement began in the late 1960s with a research project undertaken by Stanley Coopersmith (1967)—a project that has been widely misunderstood. Coopersmith, a psychologist, believed that raising children's self-esteem was important in proper child rearing. His results correlated well with age-old child-rearing practices that require clear rules and enforced limits for children to develop higher self-esteem (cited in Seligman 1995, pp. 27–28).

Unfortunately, many educators paid attention only to the feel-good part of boosting children's self-esteem; they lavished praise on children for their work, even when the children knew they weren't doing well or putting forth their best efforts. Clearly such an approach has backfired. Encouraging a false sense of self-esteem without demanding hard work is a dangerous approach. Indeed, self-esteem decreases when children realize, as most of them do, that the praise they have received is unfounded.

Nathan's Case: Low Expectations. Academic policies must undergo continual appraisal and revision when needed. The case of Nathan portrays one problem that can develop from a misguided assumption. Nathan, an eighth-grader, did not like to read for pleasure, even though he was surrounded by books at home and his parents were both ardent readers. Nathan explained to them that his teacher required him to read ten pages of a novel of his choice, then stop and write a journal entry about what he had read. The approach was counterproductive to really getting into a page-turner of a novel that he might not want to put down; it was very disruptive to the joy of reading.

Although Nathan was not even close to doing his best work, his teacher was nonetheless commending his petty effort. When Nathan's parents asked the teacher exactly what the assignment entailed, she affirmed that Nathan's understanding was correct: her students were required to read only seventy pages over the course of the term! How can anyone learn the love of reading by stopping every ten pages? No one is going to enjoy reading that way. Low expectations are a detriment to all students' unrealized abilities—abilities that may remain concealed in such an environment.

The teacher's explanation of this absurd approach was that she didn't want poorer readers to feel bad about themselves. Students could always read more than assigned, but Nathan, like most boys his age, took the easy route—and was being harmed by this poorly thought-out and dangerous process.

Sally's Case: Unneeded Stress. The case of Sally helps to clarify several hidden procedural problems that could be identified early and corrected by analyzing and accurately understanding the symptoms of children experiencing school-related anxiety. These hidden issues include lack of continuity, undertrained personnel, toxic testing, and overscheduling.

Sally's parents report that she was anxious in school. She got off to a difficult start in first grade when her teacher went on maternity leave and several temporary substitutes completed the remainder of the school year. Continuity is important, particularly to young children (Brazelton and Greenspan 2000). Could its absence have caused some of Sally's anxiety? (Similar problems can occur when school systems undertake redistricting, another procedure we should question. Students assigned to a different school as a result are uprooted from friends and the comfortable familiarity of their previous neighborhood school.)

By the second grade, Sally found it difficult to focus on her own work. There were two children with severe behavior problems in her class. At times they threw chairs and other objects, or even hit other students. Naturally, those students required considerable extra attention from the classroom teacher, who was not trained to handle behavioral problems of this severity. Sally often crawled under her desk when things got out of control. (Note here another hidden dilemma, related to teachers who lack the training, expertise, and supervision to handle children with severe emotional and behavioral problems.)

By third grade Sally was exhibiting other symptoms related to performance anxiety. In third grade all students took standardized achievement tests, and her teacher stressed the importance of these instruments. Testing has taken on far too much importance in our schools. Additionally, Sally was overscheduled with after-school programs that included drama, soccer, and music lessons. (Readers may want to refer to *The Hurried Child*, by Dr. David Elkind.) Yet the school required her participation in many extended-day activities and graded her participation on her report card. There was even some required weekend participation. Sports, music, and other formerly relaxing activities became a competitive, compulsory grind.

Counterproductive Scheduling. Looking at a typical day's academic schedule should get us thinking. Students are required to change subjects every forty-five to fifty minutes (younger children even more often). The rationale behind this hectic schedule involves the idea that children cannot maintain attention for a longer time—an inaccurate belief and a faulty approach for many learners. They can easily get back to the tasks at hand and learn in more depth if not required to stop and change classes and subjects while engrossed in learning.